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REMARKS

Here is a status report of the Historian Comm - (as of mid April) —

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OPTIONAL FORM 41 (Rev. 7-76)
Prescribed by GSA
FPMR (41 CFR) 101-11.206

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1979—281-184/1

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-9

WASHINGTON STAR
15 SEPTEMBER 1979

Allen Weinstein

An historian's place in Washington

Point of View

Historians, Leo Tolstoy once observed, were deaf men answering questions no one put to them. Jimmy Carter and those in his inner circle until recently seemed to share that unfriendly assessment. As a candidate, Mr. Carter had sought the White House by campaigning against the American political past.

Once in the White House, there appeared little to be gained by filling what some have thought of as the "historian's seat" among recent White House advisers, a role of resident chronicler-gadfly that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. performed for John Kennedy and Eric Goldman for Lyndon Johnson.

Nor did Mr. Carter feel especially drawn for sage counsel earlier in his presidency to the cadres of experienced Washingtonians whose collective careers spanned the drama of government over a half-century. White House aides kept their distance from those who might have known the life of Washington, B.C. (Before Carter), contemptuously dismissing such widely-different figures in homogenizing catch-phrases about "the Georgetown set."

Though Mr. Carter began his 1976 campaign with an appearance at Warm Springs, Ga., to emphasize his place in the Democratic continuum since FDR, he twice declined invitations to reunion dinners of New Dealers held in the District after reaching the White House. Rarely have those whose memories held much of the history and institutional memory of modern American government been shunned by an incoming president as symstematically — until the latest polls brought the dire news.

No, in adversity as always, devout politicians turn to the supposed "lessons" of history with the same alacrity that despairing religious persons rediscover their sacred texts. A frantic White House cram course is already well along.

Recently, Mr. Carter told journalists he has been carefully studying Clark Clifford's 1948 memorandum to President Truman on campaign stratgegy, hoping to watch History repeat itself to his advantage by modeling his own 1980 drive on Truman's successful comeback.

The mid-summer appointments to the White House staff of knowledgeable "establishment" figures, Lloyd Cutler and Hedley Donovan, ensure that during future policy discussions Walter Mondale will have company when tracing the history of an evolving issue back past 1976.

But if History is "in" at the White House, it is decidedly "out" at the CIA, which recently abolished its Historical Office. Many government agencies and departments maintain such offices, staffed often by professional historians including first-rate scholars such as Richard Hewlett at the Department of Energy and David Trask at the State Department.

Government historical offices have traditionally prepared studies to assist policy-makers and, sometimes, directed major historical research projects of general public interest. These practitioners of the rapidly-growing field of "public history" met here this week, at the second annual conference of Federal Government Historians.

Increasingly, they have tried to break out of the bureaucratic mold and forge cooperative links with academic historical associations. The CIA's abrupt decision to terminate its historical office, a first within the government, will not make the task of other government historians any easier.

At Langley, the Agency's one-man historical office did not devote any time to churning out studies for the public. Its research on agency projects, problems, and operations was classified and circulated for internal use only.

Although there have been reports that some of these studies reached congressional intelligence staffers, the Agency insists that budgetary constraints and not high-level embarrassment led to its decision to eliminate the office and to return its sole historian to other duties. That decision suggests a belief that "the production of intelligence" can somehow proceed in a historical vacuum.

Although Mr. Carter has come to learn differently about effective policy-making, the news that History has become fashionable at the White House may not yet have reached the Agency. When it does, Admiral Turner's aides might manage a last-minute reprieve for the Historical Office. In this case, the "lesson" of the past would be to find somewhere in the CIA's multi-billion dollar budget the small change needed to maintain what the boys with the cloaks and computers (daggers being out of style at Langley) could then justify to their superiors as a small dose of 'Historical Humint.'

Allen Weinstein is a professor of history at Smith College and author of Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case.